

DIGITAL AGNES

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Imagining African Digital Futures

With Opened Mouths: The Podcast

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SPEAKERS

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TRANSCRIPT

[Music]

Qanita Lilla: Welcome to another episode of *With Opened Mouths*. Today, we speak with Chao Tayiana Maina who is a Kenyan digital heritage specialist who works at the intersection of history, digitisation and public education. She has a background in computer science, having completed an MSc in International Heritage Visualisation and a BSc in Mathematics and Computer Science. She uses digital technologies to unearth previously hidden and suppressed historical narratives, making them accessible to a wide audience and enabling community engagement with their own cultural heritage.

In this episode, we delve into digital cultural heritage from an African perspective. We hear about engaging contested histories, navigating digital activism and proposing new futures.

[Music fades into sounds of Lake Ontario]

Qanita Lilla: Hi Chao, thank you for joining us today.

Chao Tayiana Maina: Thank you, Qanita. It's lovely to be here and such a pleasure to be featured on this podcast.

Qanita Lilla: Thanks, I wanted to jump in right from the start and find out how you started your personal journey into the digital field.

Chao Tayiana Maina: Well, my personal journey into the digital field was one of, I would say, chance -- part chance and design. I was very passionate about history when I was younger, and I felt that I was going to study. But in the ways in which I think the public education system, particularly in Kenya, works is that you are pushed towards STEM

subjects or science, mathematics and tech. And I had a natural aptitude for computers, so I decided to study computer science, which I really, really enjoyed. After that, I said, "Let me still make my way back into history, heritage discipline, and combine the two."

Qanita Lilla: So, what drew you back to history? Because computer science in my mind is a completely different field.

Chao Tayiana Maina: [Laughs] It is, what drew me back. I feel that when you have a calling or something that is innate to you and your interests, it's always harder to ignore it. And I kept feeling that I still want to work within the heritage space; I still want to contribute my skills and perspective somehow within the historical discipline and industry in Kenya. And so, I thought, "Let me combine the two." But, in a way, now that I look back, I'm really grateful for the kind of thinking and ways in which my background in computer science has allowed me to view history in a way that has given me a lot of agency, and to be able to talk about it more. But I think that the digital has definitely given me a lot of agency to work with history and to play with it, to be creative with it, to enjoy it and to communicate it in a way that if I didn't have the skills that I had -- or the foundation that I had -- I don't know if I would be able to see things the way I do.

Qanita Lilla: That is really interesting. At university, you studied history and computer science?

Chao Tayiana Maina: No. For my undergrad, I studied Mathematics and Computer Science.

Qanita Lilla: Oh, wow.

Chao Tayiana Maina: For my post-grad, for my masters, I studied International Heritage Visualization.

Qanita Lilla: Oh, Okay.

Chao Tayiana Maina: And the only reason I found this course was because I had a scholarship. I thought, "You let me just do a Master's in Software Engineering." And then someone in my life asked me, "But is that really what you want to do?" And I thought, "Actually, not really."

Qanita Lilla: Wow.

Chao Tayiana Maina: So, I went home that day and Googled and I said to myself, "This is crazy, but you never know what's out there." And I Googled, "Masters + computer science +

history.” And something came up [laughs]. There was a program at the Glasgow School of Arts, and I guess the rest is history [laughs].

Qanita Lilla: Wow. I think that it is so incredible that you still had this feeling of going back. What was it about history that you found particularly compelling?

Chao Tayiana Maina: Wow, I mean, that would for me be very much rooted in my childhood and in the homestead that I grew up in. I was raised by my mom and my maternal grandparents. We lived pretty much within the same complex, or the same homestead, what we would call *boma* in Swahili. And my grandfather is an avid reader. He's a collector of books, archives, old papers, maps, and magazines. And I think I was getting lost a lot in his library and his world, but also, for my grandparents, culture was not something that was in the past; it was very much alive in the home, in the items that were displayed on the walls, in our conversations -- it was not the other, it was who we are and who they were. That had a big imprint on me. So, I go back to the nostalgia and the romanticism of sneaking into my grandfather's library and [laughs] stumbling across a book that looks really old, or a map or an atlas, and being transported to other worlds. So, I think it is a combination of history (what is past), but also culture (what is lived) and heritage (being what is embodied). Those three were things that I was blessed enough to have in abundance in my childhood.

Qanita Lilla: And to have it embodied within you because of your growing up and because of where you come from, do you think that background gave you a strong sense to try and hold colonialism to account? To make a historical record something that you can engage with. Do you think that's where it came from?

Chao Tayiana Maina: I would say, yes, just not overtly in the beginning. I think that my work has transitioned more and more as I've entered into this space and as I've dug deeper into certain stories and themes into a form of, now as it may appear, to be a form of historical activism in a way. I would say that even though I did not start with that intention, my intention was always just that “I love history and I want to share what I find.” And I did not start with the intention of holding colonialism to account, or this being a form of reparative and historical justice, I believe that the landscape and the setting in which I grew up in gave me the confidence to do that.

Qanita Lilla: The first time, Chao, I heard you speak, was at our Summer Institute where you spoke about transforming digital graveyards into digital gardens. And it's incredible, can you tell us a bit about what that means to you?

Chao Tayiana Maina: It is very much an evolution of my practice and my thinking within this space. When I started looking at technology within the spaces of digital heritage and culture, the ways in which I approached it was that technology is here to solve problems, right. It's not here to create them, it's here to solve things, it's here to make access easier. So, that was very much the orientation of the entry point between technology and culture that you use it as a tool to solve the problems that exist. But working within this space and also having been inspired by several scholars, one of them being Temi Odumoso, from whom I first heard on the concept of the digital graveyard. I started thinking about the ways in which technology is also further entrenching some of the logics that I'm fighting against. So, whether it is in the way in which people are described or it's in the narratives that are perpetuated over and over again, and that are being digitized. Or in how people are represented visually. The digital graveyard now sits in my mind as a very real possibility of what happens when we assume that the work of technology is done as soon as we have digitized things. That people are not a core part of this digital heritage infrastructure. I think they are actually a core part of it, and as with anything, for something to grow it has to be tended and cared for. You have to remove the weeds and understand the seasons. I do feel strongly that it is such a crucial part of digital thinking and practice. That's where the concept of transforming a digital graveyard into a digital garden comes from. Because if we digitize all this data and we are creating huge amounts of data sets that are just going to be left to lie idle, they will turn into graveyards. But if we're able to interrogate them, to understand what it is that is harmful within these datasets, or what is more likely than not to cause distress to other people -- we have to be able to interrogate the data, as we wanted, to be sufficient and beneficial to others.

Qanita Lilla: I'm just thinking about these huge digitization projects, and how they're becoming increasingly popular. Agnes itself, we are busy digitizing our collection. What do you feel for people who have no idea about what this field entails? What is problematic about just digitizing -- which means taking photographs from different angles and putting them in a database using the same categories that have historically been provided. And not including people's voices or understandings. What are the risks and dangers of perpetuating these things?

Chao Tayiana Maina: Now, I would like to address three main perspectives. The first one is intention. And not just the intentional digitization, but starting with the intention and origin of the collections that we are digitizing. So, when you look at the ways in which material that is now held within museum collections was collected, those are very specific imperial and colonial ways of viewing Indigenous people that had to fit into the lens of what the colonialists thought of them. And, we see this in the ways in which objects were just taken from communities with very little context on what they were used for, or who they belong to. You are more likely to find the name of the collector, the person who took or sold the object, than you are to find the owner of the object. And once these objects and artifacts

are taken, they were not artifacts, most of them were living items in people's homes, shrines, social spaces, or in personal collections. Once they're taken and separated from the people, the ways in which they are described in the museum inventories or catalogues are very simplistic. More often than not it contains biased descriptions, assigned to incorrect people or communities. What you will find is focused on the materiality of the object. It provides a description of what it looks like -- if you're lucky enough to find the community or the region it comes from. And this is now taken and seen as the story of the object, right? When we start digitizing these collections, we are putting them online more often than not. We are using the very same cataloguing descriptions that I've mentioned as the basis of describing this material online. Now you asked, "What dangers does this have?" For one, there is very much an erasure of the Indigenous knowledge and perspectives of the communities that made these objects because their voices are not included in the museum descriptions; therefore, they're not included in the online database. It means that it is essentially silenced or erased. And so, if an object is described simply as a shield, that is all it's going to be seen as. Whereas if you interrogate this further, you can find out, for instance, that this particular shield was used during initiation ceremonies by members of a certain age group, and this ceremony takes place every five years and it was made of this wood, and this is the significance of what it means spiritually, etc. There are ways in which the metadata, the descriptions that I just mentioned, are an entry point for someone who does not know much about this history. And if that is all you present then you're saying, "That is all that is to know." There's also the issue of time. A lot of the objects were separated from people, and the descendants of these communities, many of us are trying to find our way back to our own history. We're trying to do the work, to read books. We're trying to understand the language. In encountering these artifacts presented in this way, we're essentially locked in once more into this way of thinking that was not ours to begin with, but now we have to depend on. The fact that a lot of people who used these objects, or remember who made them, or who interacted with them, many of them are not alive. So, there's also the issue of what is moving out of living memory, which is very, very crucial. So, when something moves out of it, we begin to depend on museums, the metadata, or the online catalogues and we see how the foundation of that was inherently violent and inaccurate or biased to begin with.

Qanita Lilla: Yeah, I think that is so critical to the idea that you're speaking of doing history and of people being a critical part of this intervention into the digital sphere. And I think not only "intervention" but "reshaping." I know that you also do public education work, so how do you "do" history through your public education work?

Chao Tayiana Maina: I like that question because for me, it also goes back to when I mentioned that I'm grateful for my background in computer science, because when you're approaching a software problem, you look at it in blocks. You synthesize it into modules, and you say, "I'll start with this block, then go onto this, and then I continue with this block." And so, that's how I have approached history, or "doing history," as you say. I look

at a historical theme or subject and I divide it into, "Okay, what are the action points? What are the blocks [laughs] that can be derived from this theme?" So, for example, one of the projects that I did was a project, between 2012 and 2016, in which I travelled across Kenya taking photographs of railway stations that were abandoned, dilapidated, and were at risk of demolition to pave way for a new railway. The problem that I saw in front of me was the fact that the railway had never really been seen as something that Kenyans could own, because it was built by the British in 1898 and there was a lot of romance around the railway opening up this wild unchartered African territory. And that it was seen as facilitating European interests more than it mattered to the people whose lives were uprooted and completely changed by it. So that for me was the problem. The building blocks for that were then, "Okay, 1) "What can I do?" I can take photographs of these stations and not just take photographs of them, but the other block was, "What is the perspective, and what are the memories around these stations?" And so, part of the project was 1) taking photographs of the stations, but 2) understanding the memories that African Kenyans remember about these spaces. And combining that for me was very much my first entry point into "doing history" -- not just feeling beholden to the narratives that I read, but that I could change them. There was also evidence around me every single day that history was not static. People still held these memories, and that perspectives had changed, some had not, but there were ways in which I could interact with history as a living thing. I think encompasses what I mean by "doing history." And I have used this principle also in my document detention camps from the colonial period. The same foundational principle that history is something that is important within people. It is something that we carry and that is reflected very much in our environment, in our landscape, in our buildings, and as much as it is reflected in the archive or the museum.

Qanita Lilla: So, you're saying that you are doing history in a process orientated way. You're very clear about structuring what it is you want to find out regardless of what that is, and then you go from there.

Chao Tayiana Maina: Exactly. It was analytical in a way.

Qanita Lilla: Yes. How did these projects come to you? You spoke about the railways, and the penitentiaries. How do you decide? For me personally, I feel that there's so much that almost everything that has been written needs to be reimaged. Where do you find the starting point?

Chao Tayiana Maina: Yeah, that's interesting [laughs] for me because my starting point, at least so far, has always been informed by my environment, and what I see within the spaces. I'm not just coming into research, but I live there, it is a present-day reality for me. The railway project, for instance, was informed by a small town where I studied, near the coast of Kenya that had a railway station. And that was my entry point and my curiosity around the railway station. So, I would say it is context for me, it's very much about the

environment that I am in at that particular time. The context of the history, the accessibility to different historical sources, but a lot of it is also my curiosity. In a way that it's like, "Okay, I want to communicate to people the questions that I have for myself, that I deal with every day." So, when I'm talking about, for instance, the detention camps from the state of emergency during the colonial period, it's not a question that I'm presenting as something I already know, it's mostly what I'm finding out as I go along -- what would I have wanted to find out perhaps when I was younger that I didn't? That also informs the work that I do.

Qanita Lilla: Yes. So, you've got this process-orientated approach. And even though it's in your mind, it's divided up into these blocks that you need to work through, there is creativity and intuition -- you're intuitively going along. How do you translate this into the digital sphere?

Chao Tayiana Maina: Well, the first thing, and something that has emerged in the projects that I've done, is that I've never started with the technology first. I've never been like, "Here is this brand-new scanner or website, let me find a subject for it." Or "I have the technology and then I go into the history." No, it has always been the history for me, so that has been the entry point, and then identifying that history. The second thing is resources. "What resources are available to me both technically and financially." Both in terms of physical mobility, and so it has been history as the entry point and then looking at the infrastructure. And thirdly, "What audience do I want to reach?" Because I do believe that a lot of digital work only has impact if it is used. That means having an audience, particular user group or community in-mind. And *how* this history is shared and *where* it is shared is dependent on who it is intended for, sometimes it does not. For me, it hasn't had to be the most complicated technical mobile application. It's always been, "I want to share this with as many people as possible. Where are they?" We have mostly used social media platforms, YouTube, and our website as a way to communicate with audiences. When you're asking, "How I move from having the idea into a digital space?" I think those three factors have a big determinant in how the work exists online.

Qanita Lilla: And I suppose that would also feed into the idea of having people being central. So, it's how people would use this information. "What is accessible, or how would they navigate and engage with it." What are some of the projects that you've worked on that have demonstrated this?

Chao Tayiana Maina: Well, I would go back to the Museum of British Colonialism. Which is a volunteer initiative that I co-founded along with a group of other women from Kenya in the UK in 2018. And that project for us has very much been a [laughs] reflection of all the things that I've said, and of the gaps we had in our understanding of the colonial period in Kenya. Or the truth about what really happened. So, the history was the entry point at a personal level, and also realizing that many of my peers who went through the same

education system that I did and who grew up in, let's say, similar spaces that I did, they also did not have much knowledge of this history. And that was a way in which we entered the history. Secondly, we decided to look at ways of documenting detention camps and seeing what exists. This documentation, or digitization I would maybe call it, has been on multiple fronts. The first one is through videography and seeing what remains of these sites today of what physical infrastructure remains. We were so shocked when we found a former detention camp that was turned into a school, and still is today. The students still use some of the same structures that were cells, and you can see the barbed wire on the roof. And that very much was a way of saying and "doing history." Not just reading about the detention camps but seeing where they are. It's estimated that the British colonial government set up nearly a hundred camps across Kenya. And at the height of these detention camps, sixteen thousand people were detained. And this is not to mention concentration villages for women and children, where approximately one million people were detained. So, the question was, "Where are they?" They're in the history books, yes. But what remains? That was also another block of saying, "Let's see. Let's see what remains of these structures, and then documenting them in digital formats." We've also created 3D visualizations to help people have visual references, because many Kenya's do not have a visual reference for these camps. And we know that imagery is very powerful in the ways in which it can communicate certain things. Especially when a history has been rendered for mostly for academics to deal with. It's not -- people can interpret an image more if they speak different languages. And so the 3D renderings have all of these camps and what they look like has helped us in a way. I also don't want to talk about digital work as if it exists in a vacuum. It is very much still influenced by factors such as legal frameworks and copyright systems. There are still those kinds of questions that we are navigating even with digital history. For instance, in this particular project around the detention camps, we decided to create these 3D visualizations as a response to the fact that many of the archival photographs are not in Kenya. And they still have copyright restrictions.

Qanita Lilla: Wow. Where are they? Are they in the UK?

Chao Tayiana Maina: A good amount of them were destroyed when Kenya gained independence. They were burned or dumped at sea, and the ones that survived the erasure or destruction were taken to the UK and held in a secret archive for well over 50 years until the early-2000s. That's when the Foreign Office in the UK admitted to having all these secret records of former colonies that they had not disclosed. And so, you see we're also working with factors such as these that are influencing I, as a Kenyan, would have to pay \$500 on Getty to use an image of a detention camp which my great-grandmother was in. There are also these factors that are still at play when we are doing this digital work and I think it's important to also talk about them as part of the exercise of making history.

Qanita Lilla: Yes, and what does it actually take. It's very similar to the repatriation debates when African scholars want to see their heritage and it's all in the Global North. It's completely inaccessible to study these things. But, what I wanted to touch on was the people that are doing this work. Like, I'm imagining that it's teams of people. Who are the people that you surround yourself with in this sphere that nurture and gives you the wherewithal to actually take this on? Because it's a huge emotional workload -- that's what it is.

Chao Tayiana Maina: I would say, first of all, in terms of people it's not just been the ones that I work with, but the support system that I have had. I'm very grateful for my family. Like when I went home and said that I wanted to save a railway, no one told me I was crazy [laughs]. They didn't say, "Why on earth would you want to do that?" My grandparents, siblings, and my mom have always been there to say, "What you feel is important, and we will support and help you with those networks. We will do what we can." I think in terms of people, as you so rightfully pointed out, it's not just about the work you do, it's about who is supporting and holding you. And for that, I'm really grateful for the people that I work with. I feel so privileged to be able to do this work at this time, because I recognize that there is a way in which being separated from the direct impact of this history has allowed me to navigate it in a way that my grandfather could not, especially painful histories. And you have the ways in which silence is transmitted across generations, especially those that have dealt with the full blow of this violence. And so I do feel privileged that I have, 1) the support, 2) it is a privilege, but it is also – how do I call it – a responsibility that I hold in deep, deep care and I hope that I am doing service to be able to tell these stories on behalf of generations that didn't have the tools that I have. They didn't have the infrastructure to navigate the world, and to have a global audience as I do. We are sitting here, you're in Canada and I am in Kenya, and we are having a conversation about this history and this field. And so, I see these tools and this place I am in in time as also opportunity and the opportunities that it presents. I work with people who are just like myself, asking themselves questions about who and where they are in terms of this wild thing that we're now calling "Kenya," that was not even a thing seventy years, or eighty years ago. There was no such thing as "Kenya." Now we are navigating this place of identity formation, nation building, and historical reckoning – which is wide and has so many moving parts. The people that I surround myself with are historians, they're coming to history as writers, academics, and artists. And what I see in this space today, is that history is becoming a space that people can connect with – regardless of whether they identify formally as historical specialists or not. I'm glad to be with people who embody that, but also to be creating that space for others as well.

Qanita Lilla: I think that's one of the liberatory aspects of the digital sphere that we can have these conversations. And that artists and academics can have input into an arena that was before just delegated to computer science specialists [Laughs].

Chao Tayiana Maina: Exactly. I think it's beautiful, the multi-disciplinary thinking and cross-disciplinary collaborations. The Digital Humanities is such a powerful field in the way it is enabling people who are seen to be speaking different languages to connect, build bridges, and influence thinking in a way -- especially with what's happening to technology. We are moving in the direction of robots, AI, and the metaverse – it's like, "Where is the humanity in all this? What does this mean from a human perspective and context?" I think that Digital Humanities presents such a powerful way of articulating the nuances of our world today.

Qanita Lilla: And considering the responsibility that people have. Chao, I don't know how big of a question this is [laughs], but how would you like to see the digital sphere transformed regarding museums and heritage, in both the Global South and North? You're doing it yourself in so many ways already.

Chao Tayiana Maina: Thank you, that is, indeed, a big question [laughs], wow. It always strikes me that we can talk about how we can do anything with technology – we can build rockets and the possibilities are endless. But in some cases, there are certain things in which we are taught or are positioned as "that's just the way it is." And so, just to give you an example, I was recently speaking at a conference about metadata structures and the ways in which metadata has the potential to have serious violence on communities and culture, and someone said, "But we've already digitized so much. We already have the databases so we can't change." [Laughs] And, I was thinking about it in relation to what I just said about technology having this irony that, "Yes, anything and everything is possible but at the same time, once it's done, it's done." So what I would like to see from the digital space or culture is the flexibility for things to grow, for technology to be responsive -- especially when you're dealing with such grave, grave sensitivities as people's culture and the erasure of Indigenous knowledge. I would like technology to respond to this in a way that is about listening and not just building solutions and the transposing them, because this is digital and is the way to go. If we need to think about how we can improve this database, "How we can change them, then let's do it." It's not impossible. And I want to see more boldness and vulnerability in that way.

Qanita Lilla: I think that is taking on the entire universe of the digital. Admitting vulnerability and making it flexible [laughs]. That's an incredible answer. Thank you so much. And, lastly, are there any new projects on your horizon that you'd like to tell us about?

Chao Tayiana Maina: New projects -- not new particularly, but I'm working towards entering hibernation research mode in a few months [laughs]. I'm also working towards starting my PhD, and I want to focus greatly on researching African Indigenous knowledge

and ways of designing data structures for this. And so, I might go silent, but it is because that is kind of where my head is and I've talked about it for some time. Yes, this is the problem, but what's the solution? How can I dedicate my time, skills, and experience that I've learnt so far towards solving or proposing alternatives for this? So that's what's on my horizon at the moment.

Qanita Lilla: That's a huge project and very exciting. I think that we're all waiting to see what incredible work you do next. Thank you so much, Chao. It's incredible. Your work is wonderful.

Chao Tayiana Maina: Thank you, and also for your questions. I have found them to be very thoughtful and engaging. Thank you for this platform that you and your wonderful team have provided.

Qanita Lilla: Thank you, Chao.

[Music]

Qanita Lilla: Thank you for listening to *With Opened Mouths*. Special thanks to our guest Chao Tayiana Maina for speaking with us today. This podcast is hosted by myself, Dr. Qanita Lilla, and produced by Agnes Etherington Art Centre in partnership with Queen's University's campus radio station, CFRC 101.9 FM. The music is composed by Jamil 3DN and produced by Elroy "EC3" Cox III. Episodes of *With Opened Mouths* are released monthly, and you can find them on Digital Agnes, CFRC's website and on your favourite podcasting platform. If you liked what you heard, leave us a review and subscribe now so that you don't miss a single episode. We'll see you next time.

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